Rest and Blessing

Sydney Lea, PhD

She's been my friend for over sixty years, but with so little to offer, I dread these visits. Guilt and habit compel me here to attend her soliloquies—disorderly and ceaseless.

Just now, she recites a congeries of prayers. I skim a doleful skein of family snapshots then fix on a plate strung up on a bedroom wall.

It features a loon, with here and there a dot of white on blue to suggest a star-speckled lake. Her room is humid, no matter we've passed into autumn. It oddly summons a boyhood moment in winter, though in fact the dankness is there no matter the season.

The miasmal odor of urine and cooking and talc recall the House of Rest, which my mother chaired. Despite my enraged resistance, one Christmas she offered the guests a novel diversion. I'd visit there to play my recorder for all those weary old women.

I bumbled through Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home." A child, of course, I owned no worldly wisdom, so couldn't surmise the view of race in that song, not to mention its unseemly title in such a place. I only longed to be gone from piss and blather; from juddering, liverish hands that chucked my chin; from my own absence of skill. My old friend's chatter now turns to a time when she and other young mothers took Saturday lessons from a failed ceramicist, known chiefly, it seems, for drinking. The women, off-duty, gossiped over crude crockery. To picture all this unspools the years in my mind. I reconsider her loon on its lake and find myself fending off sobs at such common, inarticulate, human striving for beauty. My own mute prayer to my own mute God is that each of us be granted rest and blessing.